

# Encouraging Your Child to Speak Up

Teaching Your Child the Most Effective Way to Speak  
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*"Stop interrupting me when I'm talking."  
"You have to learn to speak up for yourself."  
"You ask too many questions."  
"Tell me with words. I don't understand whining."  
"Why didn't you tell me?"  
"Don't bug me when I'm on the phone."  
"You should have brought that concern to me."*



These phrases and others like them are sending mixed messages to our children. They are telling them this: Talk, but don't talk. I want to hear your opinion, but not all the time. It's no wonder many of our children are confused about when and how to access their own voice.

Children don't automatically know when and how to speak up. They don't understand the appropriate times to interrupt. Nor do they often demonstrate the skills that will enable them to speak up effectively. They don't understand the power of words and how to use them to create change in their lives.

Below are suggestions for when and how to encourage your child to create his or her own voice so he or she can become an empowered, confident, self-responsible youngster.

## **Children need to speak up when...**

### **1. They need help.**

Children need help stacking blocks, reaching toys on a high shelf, writing a thank you letter, understanding a math concept, handling a peer relationship and in many other situations as they move through each developmental stage. Some situations they can handle themselves. Others they cannot. A key component to becoming independent is knowing when and how to ask for help.

### **2. They want something.**

Yes, it's OK for children to ask for what they want. Just because a child learns to speak up and ask for what she wants doesn't mean she will get it. Sometimes what a child wants is unhealthy or unsafe. It is our job as parents to deny those requests while respecting the child's right to vocalize her desire to get what she wants.

### **3. They prefer NOT to have something.**

Did you ever go on vacation with a teenager who didn't want to be there, one who pouted for the entire week you spent in a cabin in the woods? If so, you know the value of teaching children to voice their opposition to something you want for them. "I don't really like hooded sweatshirts," is important information to have before you make a \$60-dollar purchase that your child will never wear. "Lima beans is my least favorite vegetable," is valuable data to accumulate before you head to the grocery store.

f. They are asked a direct question. Recently, we asked a 4-year-old how she was doing. The mother spoke for the child and replied, "She's feeling kind of shy today." The child never looked up. There was no need to. The mother was her voice. When you speak for your child, you teach her there is no need to activate her own voice. The message you send her is this: Your voice is not important. There is no need to use it. I'll take care of your thinking and responding. When you speak for your child, you encourage her to do less speaking for herself in the future.

**5. Someone is in danger.** We wish someone had spoken up before the massacre at Columbine High School a few years ago. We wish someone had used his or her voice before the most recent teen suicide. Whenever there is potential danger, we want and need children to speak up. And we want them to do it quickly.

Teach your child the difference between getting someone IN trouble and getting them OUT of trouble. If your son wants to tell you about how his sister took his ball to get her in trouble, teach him to use his voice to communicate his desires and feelings to his sister. Teach him to say, "I don't like it when you take my ball. I want you to give it back." Be there with him when he speaks to his sister to make sure his words are heard. If your son witnesses a dangerous situation, teach him to communicate it quickly and directly. Give him some starter words that will tip you off that he is communicating potential danger. "Mom, I see danger," "Shannon needs help" or "Trouble alert" work well as clues that danger is lurking.

**6. They feel afraid, angry, sad, hurt or frustrated.**

Teach your children to communicate their feelings. Use feeling words in their presence often so they develop a broad-based feeling vocabulary. Say, "I'm feeling really frustrated right now," "I get scared when I climb on the roof" or "I'm disappointed that the rain washed out my softball game." By using feeling words yourself, you help your children learn about their own feelings and the need to express them. You give them permission to have feelings and teach them the names for those feelings so they are more likely to articulate them in the future.

Finding and learning how to use their own voice is a lifelong process for children. By implementing the above strategies with respect, patience and understanding, we help our children gain skill and confidence when speaking up for themselves.